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The Gatekeepers of the Black Press

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A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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Honors Capstone Project in Magazine Journalism

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The Gatekeepers of the Black Press

Given the plethora of black press, through a combination of print, online, and digital, black ownership in publishing is smaller than you would think. At present, four companies - Johnson Publishing, The NorthStar Group, and Earl G. Graves, Ltd. are the gatekeepers to print magazines owned by African-Americans. Together, they are responsible for EBONY/JET, The Source, JONES, and Black Enterprise.

This means the dozens of other print magazines targeted toward African-Americans are either fully or part-owned by non-blacks. Without getting

into the politics of race and ownership, when it comes to the scope of the black experience and who's telling our stories, the pool is very small. The most celebrated black titles, such as ESSENCE, EBONY, and Black Enterprise, are all important publications in chronicling and representing our experiences as black people in this country. But are they enough? Do they represent a wide enough scope of the black and brown women in this country? Do they challenge and move us forward as a people? Through my experience as not just a magazine journalism student but as a consumer of news, I would venture to say no.

In my introductory class in magazine journalism, we were asked to critique a magazine of our choice and interview senior editors on both the editorial and advertising sides of the magazine. I chose ESSENCE. At the time, ESSENCE was approaching its 40th anniversary. While I applauded the magazine for its rich history of celebrating, supporting, and proudly displaying black women on newsstands in a time when you simply saw none, I challenged ESSENCE as it entered its 40th year. While ESSENCE celebrated African-American women, ESSENCE did not celebrate *all* black women. And as a woman who has West Indian heritage and many friends who are first-generation from Africa and countless Caribbean islands, I believe the void needed to be filled. The trials and tribulations of the African-American is so important, but so too, are those of black women from other countries. A richer, but substantive, and encompassing

publication would result, I thought. But still, issue-to-issue, ESSENCE was not delivering.

And even though ESSENCE is no longer black-owned, I still consider the publication a gatekeeper of the black press because of its influence and reach. And what about when you widen the conversation still? What if you consider the Afro-Latinas, Latinas, Asians, South Asians, and Middle Eastern women? Who is their voice? In terms of publications that have a competitive national circulation, the pool is smaller still. And just like first, second, and third generation black women needed a voice, so did all women of color.

It was then that I decided what I would do for my senior honors capstone. I would create a magazine targeted toward first-generation 18-35 year old women of color living in the United States.

Experiences as a Young Writer

The first publication I wrote for on campus was *The Black Voice*. It was a small (and dwindling) staff. My first assignment was to cover the then democratic presidential nominee, Barack Obama. My story was an opinion-editorial on what Barack's nomination meant for not just black America, but for all of America.

“For the past eight elections, either a Bush or Clinton has been on the US presidential ballot. For the past eight years more-than-questionable republican politics have reigned in the White House. For years the image of US foreign policy has suffered at the hands of elitist politician who trudge around the world like it is theirs for the taking. As a half-Kenya, half-white 46 year-old male, Barack Obama’s democratic nomination for president does not just represent a change for black people, but for all people,” I said in the opening paragraph.

My first sports assignment was to do a preview of the men’s basketball season. Seventeen-year-old me nervously, but still excitedly, interviewed Coach Boeheim. I wrote a review of Solange’s solo debut album the arts section; her last full studio album to date. I was promoted to Associate Editor the next fall and in charge of money management stories and opinion-editorials. My work only lasted until the end of that semester, as the publication succumbed to not enough editors and not enough writers.

In the meantime, I was also writing for a new community publication called The Stand. The newspaper focused on positive happenings on Syracuse’s South Side. My first story was to cover the Store-for-a-Day, a small fruit and vegetable stand in an empty lot between McKinley and McClure Avenues. Four years later, the fruit and vegetable stand is now a

government-funded co-op that will have a stand along location a few block from University Ave. and have fresh foods and groceries to the people of the Southside.

From a very young age, I was drawn to journalism because of its ability to give a voice to the voiceless. So for the most part, my writing interests in my freshman and sophomore year in college centered around writing about issues that mattered to the community of color, or supporting and uplifting the community in some way.

My first internship was with JONES magazine, a national fashion magazine for women of color. After establishing a relationship with one of the advertising editors at ESSENCE, she kept in touch when she moved to JONES. I liked the magazine and asked if I could write for the online version. I sent my clips and begin writing model profiles on the latest models on the color on international runway. My profiles inspired a new section on the site, Model of the Moment. I wrote online for JONES magazine for about a year.

In the meantime, since the summer of my freshmen year, I interned at ABC Philadelphia in the marketing and web departments. While in the web department, I designed splash pages for clients such as The Philadelphia Eagles and The Mann Center. My newfound love of graphics

after taking GRA 217 in my sophomore year prepared me the web design at ABC. In turn, the web design at ABC would prepare me for the vision and design skills needed to help execute the design of my final magazine.

My third internship was with Black Enterprise magazine during my senior year. As the daily news intern, I was responsible for submitting stories three business, entertainment, and technology stories to the site daily. I was also asked to do a feature story on I currently freelance for the magazine in addition to job. I interviewed Angela Benton of CNN's Black in America on what it meant to be a black woman in a largely white, male tech space. That story went on to be in the Front of the Book section (called Lure) of HUE.

That same semester, I was enrolled in MAG 406: Magazine Writing, with Professor Mark Obbie. MAG 406 was certainly my favorite class as a magazine major, and perhaps my favorite class as an undergraduate. Our semester's work led to one longform feature. I wrote about black women and relationships, which would go on to be featured in HUE.

The Makings of HUE

In fall of 2011, it was time to make my vision into a reality. I sat with a blank piece of paper and wrote down all of the words I could think of to describe who the HUE girl was. What did she care about? What did she do

in her spare time? Who was important in her life? What did she spend most of her time doing? What does she watch? What does she read?

Answering these questions were the starting points to deciding exactly what HUE would be, and who it would serve.

I sent an email to about twenty-five young women from all ethnic backgrounds and asked if they would be interested in contributing to HUE in one way or another. They were classmates, friends, or just girls I thought would be interested in a magazine like the one I wanted to create. I told them about the magazine, why it was so important to me, and why I thought they'd make the perfect contributors. I attached nearly 20 stories ideas for what I thought would be three sections: Arts and Culture, Fashion and Beauty, and Health and Wellness. At the time, I had only named one of the sections. Fashion & Beauty would be Rags & Riches.

“Story Ideas:

Arts and Culture

1. Book review – Suggestion: *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*
2. Love Connection – What it's like to be a 20-something woman of color looking for love in the new millennium

3. My Land: What the Travel Books Forgot to Mention – An insider's guide to three girls' home countries (where to eat, where to visit, what to try)
4. The Domination of Denominations – How we interpret our parents' religion in today's society
5. Young Michelle – 10 inspiring young women who are making their mark in society
6. My First Time – A recount of your first time visiting your parents' home country

Rags `n Riches: Fashion and Beauty

1. Count the ways – 5 clever tips on how to incorporate your culture's fashion trends/staples into your American wardrobe
2. Young Designers of Our America – Up-and-coming fashion designers
3. Coloring Handbook – Experimentation with eye and lip color and what works for each skin tone and skin type (Spring makeup)
4. Spotlight On – Fashion Icon of the Month (Must work for May)
5. I Feel Prettier Overseas – Body Image issues in America and how women of color are perceived abroad
6. Natural Attraction (photo story) – How 20-somethings are embracing their natural hair

Health and Wellness

1. Au Natural – Home remedies that your mother knows but your doctor won't tell you
2. He Won't Go to the Doctor – Health disparities in the community of color and how to get our parents to care more about their health
3. Working Woman – How college students, recent grads, etc. are incorporating fitness into their daily routines
4. *I'm Going on a Picnic, and I'm Bringing... - How one fruit or vegetable is used in different cuisines and dishes around the world (Must include recipes)*
5. *Enough – Mental health issues unique to women of color in this country; realizing that we are more than "enough" in this Western society*

The response I got was promising. Most people responded saying which story they would want to write, had stories already written that they wanted to repurpose for the magazine, or had original ideas of their own. I'm lucky to know so many talented writers who were also excited about my vision. It was then that I realized that the magazine that I had been talking about for nearly two years, and thinking about since my senior year in high school, would actually become a reality.

In the final issue, eight of the sixteen stories were stories I wrote and the other eight were written by contributors. Most of the stories I had already written for other publications like Black Enterprise, in MAG 406, or on

my personal blog, The Glossy Diaries. Since I had the writers, I needed to focus on photography and most importantly design. Although I had taken GRA 217 and had experience at 6ABC, I didn't think my skills were at place to design an entire magazine single handedly. At the time, I had no idea who my designer would be.

My advisor, Melissa Chessher, was a tremendous help in making HUE come to life. Together we came up with the idea for the cover story, the section headings, story ideas for the front of the book, and so much more. Her expertise and words of wisdom gave something that I might have otherwise labored over for a day a two a solution in 15 minutes.

Most of the original story ideas did not make it into the final issue. Either myself, Professor Chessher, or a writer came up with a better story idea, or the story took on a spirit of its own as it came to life. But I made sure that each of the stories supported and showcased the HUE vision and represented the HUE girl in some way.

But I still needed a graphic designer. I logged on to Twitter one day and saw I had a new follower. Her name was Tierra Taylor, and according to her bio, she was a Newhouse student and an aspiring magazine graphic designer. Serendipitous! I messaged her and asked if she would be interested in meeting and talking about HUE. A couple

of meetings later, she was the sole graphic designer of the magazine and did an incredible job. She didn't have to, but she did. She showed an incredible amount of perseverance, dedication, and discipline, and there was no grade involved. She was just committed to HUE's vision. She designed about 75% of the magazine, and I the other 25%.

Even though the stories were shaping up, I had no idea who the cover story or cover model would be. Originally, Professor Chessher and I were thinking of scanning a celebrity on the cover who represented the HUE girl. But, who? Time was ticking. Luckily by this time, my good friend and talented photographer and designer Tusó Boothe signed on as editorial photographer. And ultimately, I decided to make the Natural Attraction shoot – a photo story about girls embracing their natural hair, the cover story. Whichever model photographed the best would make the cover, I decided. And as it happened, Amanda Williams, the model who rocked the cover shoot, wasn't even scheduled to be in the shoot. In fact, she already graduated from Syracuse and just happened to be visiting for the weekend. Since her former roommate, Tusó, was directing the shoot, she stopped by the photo studio to visit her. And as soon as I saw her hair – I knew she would be the cover. At the drop of a hat, she graciously agreed to model for the shoot. Now, all Tusó had to do was to edit the photo. But that's when an ethical dilemma arose.

In order to make the photo pop more (we weren't able to spend much time on hair and makeup on Amanda as we would have liked because it was last minute) she edited the photo to lighten her skin and her eyes. The photo looked incredible – but what kind of message was it sending? When Professor Chessher asked me about it, I admitted that I had been thinking the same thing. Weren't we celebrating *natural* beauty? What did lightening her skin and eyes say about black beauty? I decided that whether it “popped” more or not, her natural brown eyes and caramel skin were far more attractive than any edited version could be. So I changed it.

And even though it was late in the semester, the magazine was creating a buzz around campus. A former graduate and fashion design student Courtney Wheels found out about the magazine through the buzz on social media. She was excited about the magazine, and asked if she could interview me for her blog. I happily accepted, and she featured a self-illustrated version of the HUE cover and talked about how HUE was exactly what we've been missing. I was flattered! Two sophomores approached me about continuing the magazine on campus. After talking it over with Professor Chessher, I decided that since I wouldn't be on campus to carry out the vision, they would not take the name, but instead use my project as inspiration.

The vision that I had as sophomore about creating a magazine that all women of color could call their own had finally become a reality. And it was made possible because of my want for more suitable gatekeepers of the black press, my experiences as a young writer in school and in my internships, and the help of my talented peers who became the photographers, graphic designers, models, and writers for HUE magazine. I am indebted to them and grateful to the honors program for giving me a means by which I could turn my longtime vision into a reality. I am grateful to my advisor for wholeheartedly believing in and supporting my vision.

My sincere wish is that the when the magazine inspired by HUE launches on campus, it serves as a resource, place of comfort, learning, and love for all women of color on Syracuse's campus. My hope is that it fosters more solidarity among women of color, and encourages collaboration along one another and a celebration of our commonalities and differences.